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(Warner Brothers)

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Above everything else, Warren Zevon's debut album, released over a year and a half ago, proved that there could exist an Asylum artist writing about L.A. who didn't spend 98% of his time kvetching about life in the fast lane. Instead, Zevon revealed the narcissism and naivete of that plasticized Eagles consciousness through great humor and more subtle desperation in such two-pronged works as "Poor Poor Pitiful Me" (since slaughtered by Linda Ronstadt's shallow version). Ultimately, what was revealed, though, was that through his humor Zevon is an artist who works "externally" (unraveling his own sorry state through someone else's stupidity) as opposed to his friend Jackson Browne who works "internally" (to be consumed by his own terminally adolescent visions).

On *Excitable Boy*, Zevon keeps up the giggles, but this time with a macabre twist. His world has been expanded from seedy L.A. to a universal world of violence, epitomized by the title—a tale of a tot who takes a girl to the junior prom only to methodically rape and kill her. Interestingly, the music behind this icky tale features a chorus of girls gleefully singing away and a bouncy melody. The ultimate irony here only becomes clear when we hear that ten years later the excitable boy gets out of the loony bin only to dig up her grave and make a cage from her bones—an overkill image mirrored in the album's finest musical track, "Roland The Headless Thompson Gunner" (featuring a British swashbuckler melody and a chilling Procol Harum organ) in which a mercenary, murdered by the CIA, continues to march on after his death. There is a persistence of spirit expressed here—of life transcending the metaphysical violence imposed upon it, and ultimately that is why the carnage is so banal to Zevon. His detachment from fleshy destruction plus the persistence of his characters only represents the writer's strength to use humor to go beyond his apocalyptic visions.

Even when the subject gets down to love, Zevon retains the ability to mock himself, as in "Accidentally Like A Martyr," where he recognizes the egocentric melodrama of his position in love and therefore is delivered by it. With this perspective he can sing wholeheartedly of (at least) someone else finding true love in "Tenderness On The Block," while Jackson and the Eagles are still left wondering if such a thing exists.

Ultimately, though, the themes which arise are those of a survivor who gains much of his strength from the world's decadence, and the stirring music on the disk strongly backs it up. Zevon's husky, sarcastic Jackson Browne-intoned voice cinches the sophistication of "Accidentally Like A Martyr" and though there are a few throwaway cuts on the second side, overall this is one of the most uniquely affirming albums of recent memory.

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